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THE DAILY GRIND

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Of all the professions in existence the teacher's is considered the most humdrum. The complaint is usually made by the teacher herself. "Same old masterpieces, same old rules, same old pupils, same old school." In the middle of the year the creeping approach of the monster Monotony is apt to produce despair in one's heart and paralysis in one's teaching. Then is the time the pet schoolroom devils try one's patience to the verge of distraction. The teacher decides she is a physical wreck. And if her pocketbook allows, she plans to go to Atlantic City for her spring vacation. If her roseate visions are limited by *x y z* finances, she grits her teeth and resolves to take full vengeance on the next dullard that annoys her.

The real diagnosis is this: she needs variety in her work. No good teacher can ever teach the same lesson twice in the same way and retain her full self-respect. She may get equal results with her pupils—very probably she does—but she is killing her own joy in active creation and becomes only the faithful imitator of herself. Every year in June I burn all my notebooks that I have used the preceding year. Drastic proceedings, especially when I expect to be in a tight pinch a thousand times. But suppose the following January or February when full steam is on I should be tempted to use my former plans! I am firmly convinced, although they might act as opiates and relieve the tension for the time being, they would mean my final enslavement and ignominious defeat. So I start each year anew. The material may be one and the same as long as the august college board pleases, yet I shall remain undisturbed. For I have discovered that there are an infinite number of broad paths and, oh, so many enchanting little lanes leading up to the well-known masterpieces of architectural English. How I used to dread plodding wearily

through the unchanged principles of description, narration, exposition, and argumentation with my curio collection of traditional theme subjects! Now in my classes we discard as rapidly as we use, and in spite of my former incredulity the population of new titles is constantly increasing. My pupils work four times as hard as they used to and with an enthusiasm that is positively uplifting, with the result that in divisions of forty there are astonishingly few failures. But the acme of it all to me is that I myself am constantly spurred on to new effort, to ever-freshening energy and to a constant flush of mental health. I entered teaching with enthusiasm. The question confronted me, Shall I end with the same glow of active service? And each year, instead of diminishing my zeal, has added a fanatic's passion for more work. My delight is unbounded in being able to give to my pupils as fast as I can acquire.

No, I am not talking about a *Midsummer-Night's Dream* with a Coney Island setting and an O. Henry ending.

In theme work, for instance, we started the third-year high-school English with some such subjects as this: our high school as a democracy (or an autocracy), with a free discussion of aristocracy, anarchy, bolshevism, and the responsibilities of the individual citizen as well as the governing authorities. This led to a set of argumentative subjects: the Lodge-Lowell debate; the movies, a benefit or a detriment; all foreign adults in the United States should be compelled to learn the English language; the most suitable play for our class to give; the school hours should be lengthened; the taxpayers of our city should help support the railways; Freshmen are far inferior to Juniors. This last, though abominable argument, led to an act of charity. My Juniors compiled a neat little set of directions for the Freshies—where the different rooms were to be found, the name of the teacher in charge of each, the use of the library, the location of the coatrooms, the care of school materials, the rules to obey, the traditions to uphold, and the class yells. One of these little leaflets, each original in arrangement and duly decorated, was presented to each delighted Freshie. Old-time advice such as, "In case of fire do not run," "Green material will not burn," and quotations from Mark Twain were

scattered here and there to enliven the really sound directions. A board of censorship for themes was established for the first month, and no blotted manuscripts reached the teacher during that time, for those six Juniors on that committee worked like conscientious officers breaking in rookies to a sound regard for accurate detail. No wasting of time on my part dealing with forgotten margins, incorrect indorsements, omitted titles, and slovenly penmanship.

Then we concentrated upon a humorous description of how our classmates entered the room, their conduct under certain imagined conditions, a description of their characteristics or those of the teachers. Original limericks about famous men of the day drew attention to biography and verse forms. Then followed a collection of figures of speech from various magazine and newspaper clippings, followed by a comparison of the apt figures in the poetry of Masfield, Yeats, and a few of the best bits from older poets. A discussion of the choice of words led us to an eager perusal of Robert Service, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Frost, the late war poetry, and Carolyn Wells's *Nonsense Anthology*. The lure of poetic advertisements tickled their fancy and we harked back to Omar Khayyam and Chaucer. The Knights of King Arthur organizations lent interest to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and the Wolf-Cubs to Kipling's *Jungle Books*. Then President Wilson's clear speeches gained widespread admiration which led to a study of the terse expression of ideas in civics, history, science, and finally in the best newspaper editorials.

The work in original short-story writing was preceded by a red-hot discussion of what the editors of the standard magazines really wanted for material. We analyzed some of the best *Saturday Evening Post* stories, pored over the collection of *Atlantic Narratives*, squabbled over the *Century* and *Scribner* products and even commented on a few *Black Cat*, *Smart Set*, and newspaper glorifications. We studied O. Henry's "The Ransom of Red Chief," "The Cop and the Anthem"; Conan Doyle's best; Mark Twain's "The Invalid's Story"; "Ruggs R.O.T.C."; selections from *The Varmint*; and the Penrod stories. Some of the original short-stories I received from that class are going to be put into a

permanent record of our school's achievements. All were faulty in many ways, of course, but I got no dead wood, no nasty murders, no inane love stories, and no plotless drivels with unfamiliar settings in Africa, Asia, or the moon. The characters lived, and the problems were actual twentieth-century ones.

The whole idea was to work back from the modern as much as possible to whatever was permanently good throughout the ages. Yet the stress was always laid upon the living literature rather than working from the old to the new. Even the compulsory masterpieces like *Sir Roger de Coverley Papers*, *Ivanhoe*, *Julius Caesar*, *Lady of the Lake*, and *Inland Voyage* were all attacked from our own standpoint. Before reading *Sir Roger* we made a collection of current superstitions that had survived, the purposes of different clubs and organizations, professional and social, the types of pupils who would be chosen as representative for an ideal club in the school, what topics of the day would be discussed. Then we plunged into the aforesaid classic to compare it with our own conclusions. *Ivanhoe* was arranged as a movie thriller; *Inland Voyage* studied from modern war maps; *Julius Caesar* debated by opposing teams; and the *Lady of the Lake* used as illustrative material to give a better understanding of the value of the Scotch regiments in the Great War. All this is only harping on the old theme of motivation, of course, but there are hundreds of teachers who have yet to experience the thrill of working with the electricity of literature rather than digging up mummies from the mausoleums of the past.

In regard to technique. On account of insufficient preparation in the grades we are compelled to spend a great deal of time upon spelling and dictation. At first we tried competitive drills, but my Juniors felt rather insulted at such indignities. Then one day we were discussing an article from the *New York Times*, which prompted one boy to investigate the number of illiterates and non-English speaking people in our own mill city. We all followed his lead, and the suggestion was made that we start a thousand-word spelling list, adding to it day by day, to present to the foreigners in our evening schools—a good serviceable list of the words these aliens would actually need for patriotic citizenship. My class found out how limited their own supply was and began to

increase their vocabularies. The interest spread and we had many spirited discussions over the words to retain and those to discard. I claimed that a compilation of mere words was of little practical value to the foreigner, so we supplemented each twenty-word lesson with a snappy original paragraph including the words for dictation. Many a good time we had choosing the best paragraph from the number submitted. Of course every member of my class participated and great was the joy when a pupil could attach his initials to two or more approved paragraphs. But every member had to write and re-write until at least one was considered worthy to add to the little book. Besides this original work which I tried out for dictation we formed the habit of using fifteen minutes of each recitation for short squibs from history, new inventions in science, Dickens' caricatures, Leacock, and Chesterton. The fables of old Aesop vied in popularity with those of George Ade. Pupils worked overtime to bring me interesting bits.

Perhaps these meager hints give very little idea of the methods used. But the one ideal in the back of my mind is to cultivate in my pupils and in their teacher the immeasurable joy of discovery. These same methods I can never use again. I must go bagging new game. While my charges study I, too, must study. When they write their short-story assignment, I am plodding away in a professional short-story extension course to bring in my own offering for their impolite but sincere criticism. When they write limericks, I write limericks; when they give oral themes, I give an oral theme; when they read a book to report upon, I read a new one; and last but not least one day a week in April and May we go our own sweet way into the woods or fields "to study in the Book of Nature." For why study life indirectly if it can be reached at the source? Why not sweep our dusty brain cells clean? Think of the hopeless analyses and petrifying monstrosities collected there.

It is a harsh policy for teachers, I admit, but it keeps me sensitive to criticism, quaking as they quake, eager to please them as they are eager to please me. One thing I have learned. There is no time to get into a rut. Teaching is not a daily grind of the same old thing. For the real teacher must sit on top of the world, where the view is constantly changing.